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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an ongoing literacy research project involving writing samples and observations of workers in a state social service agency, a large labor union, and several scientific laboratories. Procedures discussed are: (1) selecting participants who were willing to give 16 hours of interview time over the course of a year; (2) selecting representative writing samples; (3) structuring interviews; (4) categorizing reasons writers gave for choosing such features in their writing as forms of address, context, reference to self, elaboration, shifts in levels of abstraction, and formulaic conclusions; and (5) analyzing writing samples and interview transcripts. Also discussed is the immediate goal of the study: to understand literacy practices outside schools and to test assumptions from current discourse theory. Questions to be addressed in the remainder of the study are also presented. (AEA)

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Naturalistic Studies of Nonacademic Writing
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Goswami and Odell, in a three-year project sponsored by the National Institute of Education, are using on-site observations and samplings to study the nature and functions of writing that people have to do as a regular part of their day-to-day work. Sites include a state social service agency, a large southeastern labor union, and the laboratories of several scientists.

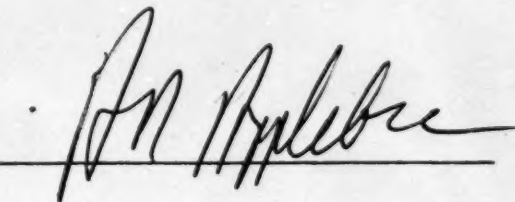
The purpose of this paper is to present a methodological survey of an on-going literacy research project ("The Nature and Functions of Nonacademic Writing," sponsored by the National Institute of Education) as well as a brief summary of preliminary outcomes. Since there is no well-defined theoretical apparatus for describing ongoing writing activities in a manner useful for the analyses we propose, one of our chief tasks has been to collaborate with and to use insights from ethnography of communication, linguistics, and discourse analysis to inform our procedures and to assist us in raising questions about research populations we wish to view as active, functional writing communities.

After extensive on-site observations of workers in a number of settings, we identified workers and union members who represented a range of job levels and who were willing to give us up to sixteen hours of interview time over the course of a year. Initial interviews had as their purpose to develop a description of the research sites apart from official, published descriptions, and to provide at least an impressionistic understanding of who writes what to whom and under what circumstances in these writing communities. Problems included guarantees of confidentiality, infringement on time, interference with on-going practices, and our own position as observers rather than participants. These initial interviews will serve as the basis for correlation studies at a later time.

Once initial interviews had been completed, we asked workers to save samples of writing they had to do as a regular part of their everyday jobs over a two-week period. Selected samples formed the basis of subsequent interviews. Different writing occasions make very specific demands on writers; thus we have tried to assemble writing samples ranging from handwritten notes to self to edited

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J. N. Appleby", is written over a horizontal line.

documents for external audiences. Later, if we discovered that writing done regularly in the social service agency was not included in the sample, we asked workers to go through their files and to give us copies of the missing documents. To insure that we had representative writing samples, we tried to identify characteristics that seemed likely to have rhetorical significance and that would let us, when possible, make distinctions that were not based on an individual researcher's interpretation of the substance of each piece of writing.

Subsequent interviews, based on writing samples, identify reasons underlying writers' choices by making changes and asking writers whether they think those changes appropriate (Cooper and Odell, 1976). In framing questions, we have asked only about choices actually available to writers, that is, choices present in their writing. Features we asked about include: form of address, provision of context, reference to self, elaboration, shifts in levels of abstraction, and formulaic conclusion. We tried to ask each writer about each feature four or five times.

Even at this stage, it is clear that these structured interviews can provide rich data about the processes by which writing gets done. We are able to categorize reasons writers give us for making choices (decisions are audience-based, writer-based, subject-based, or a-rhetorical), which in turn may give us information about the intellectual processes of writers (Odell, 1977). We are also analyzing transcripts so as to identify variations

to which writers are highly sensitive, since these variations are likely to carry meaning and to express social structure in the social service agency.

We are analyzing social service agency writing samples for comprehensibility and acceptance by readers. We would like, of course, to be able to predict the probability of a writer making a particular choice upon a particular writing occasion. We are beginning cohesion analysis of texts (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) to see if we can discover why certain texts elicit certain responses. Important analyses of transcripts and writing samples are replicated by independent judges.

In addition to completing the procedures described above, we wish to assess the written literacy demands made on active members of an industrial labor union and to develop a taxonomy of writing tasks performed by such members. We are surveying union members to see if we can identify the full range of writing actually done and to see if we can get a notion of the value placed on certain texts.

We are working with a small number of scientists in an attempt to describe some of the processes by which scientific data are transformed into scientific discourse.

The central purpose of this research is not the improvement of teaching; our immediate goals are to understand literacy practices outside schools and to test assumptions from current discourse theory. However,

preliminary findings suggest that we may be able to address questions that include the following:

1. Do the composing processes of working scientists and technicians differ from accounts we have of the composing processes of student writers or others writing in experimental settings?

2. According to some researchers, expressive writing (speculative, exploratory writing) is, developmentally and otherwise, an important mode of discourse. Do scientists and technicians write expressively on the job? What are the implications of the answer to this question for teachers of advanced technical, scientific, and professional writing courses?

3. What is the nature of the revising processes of scientists and technicians? Are individuals who regularly perform certain tasks, such as experimental validation, say, likely to be proficient in certain writing situations, such as revising? Would it be useful to develop a taxonomy of interventions into the writing processes of scientists and technicians?

4. Can we design classroom activities so that students engage in processes similar to those they will experience when they begin working as scientists and technician? Would such simulations result in more effective writing programs?

5. How may we define work-site writing competence? What are useful ways of looking at the acquisition of work-site writing competence?

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